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RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUEHTV/AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV PRIORITY 1278

RHMFIA/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE PRIORITY

RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 1438

RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO PRIORITY 1462

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

RHMFIA/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001253

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/GAVITO/HARDING

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/15/2017

TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER PARM SY IS LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: ARMY COMMANDER APOLOGIZES FOR INOPPORTUNE

REMARKS

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for Reasons: Section 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

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¶1. (C) Lebanese Armed Forces Commander General Michel Sleiman denied that his recent marks were an accusation against the US of providing insufficient military assistance, reaffirming instead Lebanon's deep appreciation for the USG's essential role in helping the army battle Fatah al-Islam extremists in Nahr al-Barid. He stood by his claim, however, that Syria was not responsible for the extremists' actions, though he noted that his comments were not intended to challenge USG assertions to the contrary. Claiming to have no appetite for the presidency, Sleiman also rejected the suggestion that his remarks were made in response to perceived US opposition to a constitutional amendment needed to allow him to be a contender. We cannot help but question, however, given his pro-Syrian past and strong potential to emerge as a compromise presidential candidate, whether Sleiman's remarks were not a calculated attempt to boost his presidential prospects. End summary.

SLEIMAN'S REMARKS UNDERMINE US MILITARY ASSISTANCE

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¶2. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by Defense Attaché and Pol/Econ Chief, met with General Sleiman at his office on Yarze on August 16. LAF Lt. Col. Edmond Homsi also attended the meeting. The Ambassador told Sleiman he had requested the meeting to express deep US concern for the General's recent remarks decrying the lack of military assistance the LAF has received. (Note. Among other outrageous comments, Sleiman said those who promise aid but don't deliver are telling the LAF to "die first and support will come later." End note.) Many in the US (and probably also Syria and Hizballah) interpreted this to be a direct criticism of the US, the Ambassador said. We find his remarks inexplicable and offensive, given the fact that the US has gone out of its way to increase the quantity, quality, and timeliness of its military assistance to Lebanon, with Congress approving an unprecedented \$321 million in grants for two years (2006 and 2007), in addition to ACSA assistance. Not only were the General's comments insulting, but they risked making it more difficult for the USG to justify additional aid to Lebanon. What, the Ambassador said, can we say about Sleiman's remarks to all of those USG civilian and military officials who had worked very hard, 24/7, to accelerate assistance to the LAF

¶3. (C) Furthermore, the Ambassador continued, because Sleiman, whether he likes it or not, is a likely forerunner in the upcoming presidential election, his comments take on new political meaning and attract a broader audience; in this case, many viewed them as a clear message to Hizballah and Syria that the LAF is not in partnership with the US. The USG is doing its utmost to support the LAF in becoming a mature, professional army capable of defending all of Lebanon and beholden to a civilian government, the Ambassador stressed. Ill-advised comments such as these, unfortunately, significantly dampen enthusiasm for continuing US assistance.

Adding that he hoped Sleiman's criticism wasn't a reaction to perceived USG opposition to amending Lebanon's constitution to allow Sleiman to run for president, the Ambassador noted that the US doesn't oppose an amendment per se, provided it is an internal Lebanese decision and the repercussions of yet another amendment are fully considered; but the US would strongly object to another amendment imposed from outside or forced through by intimidation, such as the 2005 amendment engineered by Syria to allow an extension of President Lahoud's mandate by three years.

SLEIMAN DENIES REMARKS AIMED AT US

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¶4. (C) Sleiman, obviously trying to defuse the tense tenor of the conversation, exclaimed "I'm sorry!" several times during the course of the meeting and promised to rectify the situation. He dismissed the press reports as an unfortunate misinterpretation of remarks he made to retired classmates from the military academy during one of their regularly scheduled monthly lunches, one of whom works with the media

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and subsequently published them without Sleiman's review. In what was another of his frequent slaps to PM Siniora, Sleiman was merely expressing his frustration, he explained, that the Lebanese government had been securing equipment from abroad for the Internal Security Forces (ISF) for years but only recently for the LAF. To prepare an army for war, you need to start long before the war, he argued. Furthermore, the remarks were not aimed at any specific country (though he had asked the classmate to strike Russia, which was mentioned by name, from the published comments).

¶5. (C) Sleiman was "absolutely not" pointing fingers at the US, he stressed repeatedly; on the contrary, he told his classmates the US had rushed its military assistance to help the LAF in its fight in the Nahr al-Barid Palestinian refugee camp. Noting that the \$271 million US package for 2007 had not arrived yet (it is starting, the Ambassador interjected), Sleiman nevertheless acknowledged that the US had provided essential ammunition, without which the LAF would not have been able to continue its battle against Fatah al-Islam (FAI) extremists in Nahr al-Barid. The LAF had received "practically nothing" from other countries. Sleiman vowed to clarify his comments and speak in detail about US support at the earliest opportunity. (Note. Sleiman later said he would use his August 17 meeting with visiting Staffdels Talwar and Makovsky to clarify his earlier remarks. We will hold him to the task. End note.)

¶6. (C) Sleiman further stressed that he was proud of Lebanon's long relationship with the US, and had been vocal about it even during the Syrian occupation. Now was not the time for Lebanon to back out of its close relationship with the west, especially the US and France, and it was up to Lebanon's Christians to "carry the torch of this culture." Urging the USG not to "link its assistance to the LAF to the name of General Sleiman," Sleiman said he would leave office the moment he felt his presence was an obstruction to the army.

¶7. (C) Sleiman repeatedly denied any desire to become president ("as Commander, I can give orders; as President, I

can't"), claiming instead that he dreams of retirement and sleeping in his mountain home, which he hasn't visited for an overnight stay in seven years. None of Lebanon's politicians want a military man either, he said. Revealing for a moment the political animal that lies within, Sleiman did admit that he would like to become a member of parliament, if only to tell "criminals" like Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea and Free Patriotic Movement leader General Michel Aoun "to go home." He hates the thought, he acknowledged, that Aoun and Geagea can claim to be the leaders of the Maronite community.

SYRIA NOT BEHIND FATAH AL-ISLAM

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¶18. (C) The Ambassador further asked Sleiman what motivated him to announce at this time, while fighting still continues in Nahr al-Barid, that Syria is not behind the FAI extremists. Sleiman responded that, as Commander-in-Chief, he is required to identify "friends and enemies" in the LAF's Operation Plan. As he told the Ambassador several months ago, al-Qaeda is listed as the enemy in Nahr al-Barid, a fact that makes it easy to rally the army against the insurgents (whereas listing Syria was too "political" and would have divided the troops). The simple truth, Sleiman claimed, is that the LAF has no facts to suggest Syrian involvement; in fact, there was evidence Damascus withdrew people from Nahr al-Barid before the fighting began and has ensured that Lebanon's 11 other refugee camps remain calm.

¶19. (C) Sleiman further claimed his remarks were made five days earlier (at an August 8 lunch) than their August 13 publication. They were therefore not in any way a challenge to recent USG assertions of Syrian involvement in Nahr al-Barid.

COMMENT

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¶10. (C) Sleiman, shrugging expansively, initially tried to pass off his remarks as a case of blowing off steam among friends, which, to his dismay, inadvertently got blown out of

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proportion. However, the tension with which he gripped his pen in one hand and continually fidgeted with the other suggested that he understood the seriousness of the Ambassador's message that, as a leading candidate for president, his words carry weight and he can't afford the luxury of making inopportune remarks in any context. We will watch carefully for future blunders -- if indeed, as he claims, his remarks were not a calculated message to Damascus (though his past association with Syria makes it hard for us to believe that an intelligent man -- and LAF commander for the past nine years, nearly seven under Syrian occupation -- like the General is not aware of the impact of his words).

¶11. (C) Furthermore, though Sleiman claims to have no desire to be president, it is a very realistic possibility that he will emerge as the compromise candidate, a prospect that his recent remarks, widely perceived as providing assurances to Damascus, conveniently enhance. While "a president can't give orders," a Sleiman presidency does evoke the possibility of a de facto military coup (albeit presumably one agreed by consensus of Lebanon's political leaders) that would nevertheless place a candidate in Baabda Palace whose anti-Syrian bona fides remain questionable.

FELTMAN